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Thai rice farmers gaining independency

December 2005

Rice Fund Surin is a small rice cooperative in the north-eastern part of Thailand, home of the best Hom Mali Rice in the country. Until last year, the cooperative used to be part of Greenet, Thailand's biggest organic and Fairtrade cooperative.

At the beginning of 2005, Rice Fund Surin decided to take a big step forward and to become independent from Greenet, an enormous challenge for a cooperative with only 45 members. The cooperative applied for Fairtrade Certification, which they received in August 2005 and provided them with a direct access to the international market. The cooperative's Fairtrade certified rice can now be found in supermarkets in several countries in Western Europe and in the USA and growing sales figures are not only reflecting the success of the Fairtrade certification for the Rice Fund Surin, but also suggest a bright future for the cooperative and set the course for expansion: "We are now working to get the food safety certification as well as finding more importers for our rice" explains Ms. Sompoi Chansaeng, Manager of the cooperative.

Fairtrade enables long-term stability through diversification

Rice Fund Surin has been using the Fairtrade Premium to support new members and also those who wish to switch to organic farming. "As



Kanya Osori in her rice field



an organic farmer my life has improved dramatically: The quality of my land and of my rice is much better and my family enjoys better health" one of Surin's members points out. Moreover, the money from the Fairtrade Premium is used to support various educational, cultural and environmental projects in the area, such as planting trees in the community forest. During weekends, children help out in the planting and learn about environmental issues and how to care for the environment. The forest in turn benefits the community by providing, for example, wood and fruit.

Another big achievement of the Rice Fund Surin cooperative was to reduce its dependency on rice as the only crop. The cooperative is using the Fairtrade Premium to create a fund for its members to buy seeds in order to allow the cooperative to grow other crops besides rice. By doing so, the cooperative can diversify its income during the year and no longer depends on the harvest of one crop, creating more security and stability for the cooperative.

The experience of Kanya Osori, a 36 year-old member of the Surin Rice Fund, shows the impact the diversification has on farmers' lives. Kanya has around 7.2 acres of land and she was able to sell around 5 tonnes of paddy at 10 baht last year which amounted to a rice income of 440 euros net. "This was not enough to meet all the needs of my family" Kanya explains. Thanks to Fairtrade, Kanya is now not only growing rice, but also organic peanuts and various fruit and vegetables which she is selling on the local market. The extra earnings have a drastic impact on Kanya's financial situation: Last year my income from peanuts and vegetables as well as from the sale of one cow, allowed me to have an extra income of 540 euros" she points out. Her total income for the year amounted to about 980 euros. All expenses being deducted, Kanya is able to save around 100 euros at the end of the year, a substantial amount in rural Thailand. "With this extra money I am able to send my two daughters to high school and plan for unforeseen circumstances, something impossible before" says Kanya.

The diversification does not only have a financial impact on the lives of members' families, it also allows them to stay together in the village. In the past, since the rice farmers depended on only one crop a year, most of the families had to go to the city during the dry season to earn extra money. This meant that entire families would be separated for half of the year. "Crop diversification and organic farming now allow us to work in our villages the whole year round, and give us the chance to feed ourselves and keep our families together" adds Kanya. Through fairtrade the Rice Fund Surin members are not dependent on fluctuating rice prices any longer, they are now exporting directly and have a certain degree of stability and independence. Being in charge of their own lives and destiny they are not obliged to live for the moment any longer, but can consciously plan for their own and the following generations' future.

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